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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 001911

SIPDIS

NEA FOR SATTERFIELD

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SUBJECT: UN AGENCIES FED UP WITH GAZA RESTRICTIONS; BUT NO
IMMINENT FOOD CRISIS

REF: TEL AVIV 1546

Classified By: Economic Counselor Ted Mann per 1.4 b and d

¶11. (C) Summary: Following a series of terrorist attacks at or near the Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel, the GOI began requiring UN personnel to walk through the crossing point. The GOI also restricted movement of all containers at Karni crossing following information suggesting that the terrorists implicated in the March 14 Ashdod bombing may have escaped Gaza in an empty container. UN agencies accepted the restrictions begrudgingly and on the condition that the measures would be temporary. On March 26, UN agency heads issued a press release stating that the limitations were no longer acceptable and might result in the UN having to reduce or terminate some critical humanitarian services. The GOI has offered to restore some vehicle access but far short of what is needed, according to the UN agencies. As for food access, the GOI is allowing UNRWA food containers in, but no empty containers out. The UN is refusing to import more food and risk incurring thousands of dollars in demurrage fees for the empty containers. GOI efforts to resolve these issues have been clumsy and ad hoc. For its part, the UN may have overstated the possibility of a food "crisis". Solving these problems expeditiously is necessary to ensure uninterrupted humanitarian services to the Palestinian population. End Summary and Comment.

Restrictions at Erez: UN says "Not going to take it anymore"

¶12. (C) On March 26, UN heads of agencies held an emergency meeting in Jerusalem where they agreed that they could not continue "business as usual". Specifically, they agreed that no staff would enter/exit Gaza by foot and that no new containers of food would be imported until the GOI had demonstrated that empty containers would be allowed to exit Gaza. They further agreed to issue a press release entitled "UN forced to consider humanitarian cut-back in Gaza" in order to put public pressure on the GOI to revert to status quo ante in regards to its treatment of UN personnel. (See para. 11 for full text).

¶13. (C) UN frustration has been building since the GOI began requiring personnel to walk through Erez following the failed March 6 terrorist attack at the crossing that caused some minor damage to the infrastructure. This rule has taken on various permutations, with personnel sometimes being required to use the far more restrictive chute for Palestinian day laborers, and other times being allowed to walk through the VIP area. The UN and diplomatic community argued that not only did the rule significantly delay personnel, it also put staff at serious additional risk by precluding the use of armored vehicles and exposing personnel to possible militant fire in the "no-man's" land between Israel and Gaza. On March 23 (the day after the Yassin killing), the IDF abandoned a UN official along with two international journalists and five Italian NGO workers in the laborer's chute when the crossing began to receive mortar shells. The eight individuals were left stuck between two electronic gates for 20 minutes, while IDF personnel retreated to their defensive positions. This incident was the "final straw" according to UN sources.

GOI conflicted on how to facilitate humanitarian work and guarantee security

¶14. (C) There have been a series of meetings, letters and phone calls between the diplomatic/relief community and the GOI over the past few weeks to discuss Erez restrictions. Initially, COGAT intimated that the restrictions were temporary and the status quo ante would be restored as soon as a security review was complete and the infrastructure (gate and road), which had been moderately damaged in the March 6 attack, repaired. As time passed, the GOI restored vehicle access to diplomats and a limited number of blue UN laissez-passer (UNLP) holders. As of, March 29, the GOI has offered unlimited access for diplomats and red UNLP holders and vehicle access for 21 blue UNLP holders who are resident in Gaza.

15. (C) The relief community has tentatively rejected this offer, though it will not take an official position until after the Heads of Agencies meeting scheduled for April 1. A UN official asked "how can we tell half of the international staff that they can drive through Erez, while the other half has to walk and be exposed to greater security risk?" Numerous UN colleagues have told embassy staff that they will not/not accept a less than comprehensive solution. (Note: There are approximately 50 international blue UNLP holders resident in Gaza. A much larger number of international staff for the UN and other NGOs are resident in Jerusalem and require regular travel to Gaza. Thus far the GOI has offered no dispensation for staff resident in Jerusalem. End Note.)

16. (C) Daniel Beaudoin, a mid-ranking official in COGAT, confided to econoff on March 28 that the GOI was "struggling" with what to do. He said that the intelligence services did not want any/any cars at Erez and although they knew that the chances were slim that a diplomatic or UN car would be boobytrapped, they were acting out of "fear." At a March 23 meeting, Coordinator for Government Activities General Mishlev told the TFPI that he would raise the issue of vehicular access with General Harel, IDF Head of Southern Command, and report back to the group early the following week. We do not yet have a read-out of that discussion.

UNRWA says won't bring in more food
until container restrictions eased

17. (C) The international community is also concerned over problems with food shipments to Gaza. Karni crossing has worked intermittently, at best, over the month of March. The press reported widely that the terrorists who attacked Ashdod left Gaza by stowing away in an empty container that passed through Karni. The GOI has not yet officially confirmed those reports, but has restricted movements of containers out of Gaza in the wake of the attack. UNRWA reported that it currently has 40 empty containers in Gaza that it needs to return to Ashdod. It is charged USD 20/day/container for the first ten days as demurrage; thus currently the agency is incurring costs of USD 800/day. After the first ten days, the charges increase significantly.

18. (C) Kris Nordahl, UNRWA deputy field representative, told econoff that the agency had decided not to import any more food until it had concrete proof that empty containers will be allowed out. Nordahl said that for the past three days he had been in a "Kafkaesque" world where the office of the Coordinator for Government Activities (COGAT) tells him he has permission to export empty containers, only to be told at the crossing that no such permission exists. UNRWA currently has 267 containers of food that have been cleared at Ashdod and are ready for shipment to Gaza. As of March 26, Nordahl said that the GOI is allowing 50 humanitarian containers in per day, which Nordahl characterized as "sufficient." However, Nordahl said that UNRWA had "learned the lesson" of the past of "trusting" the GOI and going forward with operations, only to be "stuck" with costs later on. UNRWA would therefore not/not bring in any new containers until it had been "proven" that the GOI would let empty containers out, he said. According to Nordahl, there is enough food in the warehouse to make distributions through this week only. WFP reported that it was not experiencing any problems at Karni because coincidentally it had no scheduled shipments. Genevieve Wills, WFP Gaza director, told econoff that the agency has enough food on-hand to make distributions through mid-April.

Comment

19. (C) The primary issue at this point is restoring vehicle access for international personnel. We concur that it is too dangerous to walk through Erez crossing and the procedure significantly hinders the work of the relief community. The statements about food availability are somewhat misleading since technically the UN can/can import containers; It just lacks a guarantee that it will be able to export the empty containers. Last year the UN was stuck with tens of thousands of dollars in demurrage fees when unable to export empty containers for a sustained period. Ideally, this issue should be resolved and we will not have to see whether the UN "blinks" and brings in food containers without the desired proof that it will be able to get them out. Meetings continue between the GOI and various UN and donor interlocutors. However, thus far, GOI efforts to handle the situation have been clumsy and ad hoc. For example, on March 28, COGAT officials called UN heads at 08:30 and informed them that all international staff could travel freely with their vehicles until 12:00 noon that day. March 29, there was no such "window". European Union officials and others have said they simply cannot work under such parameters. Solving these problems expeditiously is necessary to ensure

uninterrupted humanitarian services to the Palestinian population. End Comment.

Press Statement

¶11. (U) (Begin text) (Title) UN Forced to Consider Humanitarian Cut-Bank in Gaza (Title)

New York and Gaza City, March 26 - The heads of the United Nations agencies may have to reduce or terminate some critical humanitarian relief operations in Gaza due to new movement restrictions imposed on UN personnel and humanitarian assistance by the Government of Israel.

For the last three weeks, nearly all UN and other humanitarian agency vehicles have been prohibited from crossing through the Erez checkpoint. In addition, the movement of food containers through Karni - the only commercial crossing point in Gaza - is currently obstructed.

These unacceptable limitations on access for humanitarian staff and goods are undermining UN operational capability to deliver essential services and food relief to Gaza's civilian population. These operations provide more than half of Gaza's essential social services, as well as food assistance to several hundred thousand people. Any cutbacks will lead to a further deterioration of the already fragile humanitarian situation in Gaza.

The UN recognizes Israel's legitimate security concerns and senior officials have repeatedly sought to engage the Government of Israel to resolve these concerns, but without success. Because the restrictions persist, the UN is compelled to call publicly on the Government of Israel to restore full access to Gaza for UN and humanitarian workers and goods.

The UN agencies include:

UNRWA
WFP
UNICEF
UNDP
WHO
OCHA
UNSCO

(End Text).

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